

Supporters of expanded bus-ferry service say harbor can equal a 40-lane highway

If the Greenbush trains are revived, the T expects about 3,200 rail passengers a day. Of those, about 1,500 passengers would be coming off existing forms of mass transit — the Red Line, boats or buses.

That leaves just 1,700 new mass transit passengers. And boat advocates say a beefed up ferry system can easily match that ridership.

At the moment, MBTA-subsidized boats carry about 1,100 passengers a day between Hingham and Rowe's Wharf in Boston. A competing boat company, Mass Bay Lines, carries another 400 from Hingham. And a third company takes about 60 passengers on one trip a day between Hull and Boston.

The Coastal Coalition says an improved boat and shuttle bus system to take riders from their homes to terminals would cost \$50 million to establish.

Restoring the Greenbush line would cost at least \$215 million, and possibly more than \$400 million, depending on whether it is built at ground level or with one of several types of tunnels under Hingham Square.

"Instead of putting \$300 million into rails that can only go to a fixed place, it's far better to spend \$50 million on a flexible system that can go to the airport, to the North Shore, anywhere," said Drew Horn, a coalition member and Hingham homeowner. "The system we're proposing is the ultimate in flexibility in a city and a region dominated by water."

Under orders from the state Secretary of Environmental Affairs, the T has been studying boats and other alternatives to commuter rail for the Greenbush corridor.

But both MBTA General Manager John J.

Haley Jr. and State Transportation Secretary James Kerasiotes say boats simply cannot move masses of people the way trains can.

"Look, I like ferry boats; we're not against them," said Haley, adding that the MBTA wants to expand ferry service regardless of whether the railroad is built. "But they don't begin to solve the problem."

Reardon and the coalition argue that the MBTA has not seriously investigated water transportation. They say boat studies by the T are flawed and intentionally downplay ridership projections to make rail appear the best option.

They cite one recent T document that says that if boat service is expanded and improved with faster boats, ridership would actually fall below current levels.

The same document also says that only 10 people would ride a bus network to the boats.

Joseph Connor, the MBTA's project manager for the Greenbush line, says that conclusion came from a computer model that found few commuters would be willing to take a bus to a ferry. He said the boats would attract mostly riders who live near the terminals.

"Given the travel time, the income, and the fact that most people have two cars in this area, (buses) would be a bust," Connor said.

But the coalition says the T is just plain blind to the potential of water transportation.

"They've been challenged to look at alternatives, and it has befuddled them," says Randy Young, who founded the coalition along with fellow Hingham resident Nancy Buckley. "They can only see trains."